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The last days of Lodz-Ghetto

Lodz-Ghetto, named by the Nazis, "Litzmannstadt- Ghetto," reached the final chapter of its existence in the summer of 1944.
Its liquidation was a complete defeat for the Jewish Commandant, Chaim Rumkowski, and his narrow-minded strategy of survival by obedience and work. He appealed to us, the starving residents, "Jews of Lodz, your production is needed for the German war machine. Increase your efforts and so we'll become indispensable and our lives we'll be saved."

Before the war Rumkowski was a not-much respected member of the Jewish community, a " Luftmensch" who somehow managed to obtain a prestigious position as director of a Jewish orphanage. He became the head of the Judenrat when Lodz-Ghetto was created. Judenrat consisted mainly of middle-class men like Rumkowski himself. The heads of various departments were not criminals and in some cases educated men. Rumkowski looked like a jovial, sixty something-old uncle with an open, clean, wide face and piercing blue eyes. A thick mop of white hair gave him a look associated with Albert Einstein. I saw him often during the many speeches he delivered for us, the ghetto dwellers. He was corpulent while we had the skeletal look of people who starved for a long time. He was well dressed while, on us, rags fluttered like on a hanger. He took pleasure in inspecting the ghetto riding in a droshke with his good-looking sister-in- law, the beautiful Helena. She had a round face, round arms,

round legs, a round figure of a well nourished woman who should have had watched her diet for she was bordering on obesity. Sometimes a man threw himself on the droshke in a desperate attempt to hand over a letter to Rumkowski asking for a job, for any kind of help, and in a split second a violent fit changed the blue color of Rumkowski's eyes to a menacing color of steel and gave the black pupils a white appearance. In this moment one could see the tyrant he had become, a power-intoxicated man with an inflated ego plus a manic self-interest, selfish needs and a libido which increased in intensity with his ascent to power. He spent much of his time within the walls of the miniature Fascist state he had created, a state of immense inequalities, a pathological state where people were dying of hunger, diseases, a state convulsing from constant deportations. People he saw everyday were sycophants ready to accept what he said as a matter of an indisputable law. The law in reality was dictated by Biebow, the Nazi commandant and Rumkowski was only the unwilling executor of the Nazi orders.

In the summer of 1944, Biebow, the German commandant of Litzmannstadt- Ghetto sent the Jews and the Jewish commandant of Lodz- Ghetto to the final destination: **Auschwitz.**

Biebow selected six hundred Jews to clean the Ghetto and by chance, yes, by some unknown, convoluted and mysterious ways of fate, the low echelon of the ghetto population, the pebbles on the floor on which the ghetto machine rested, six hundred Jews of no importance whatsoever, sifted through the cracks of the Nazi system and remained in the ghetto. All ghetto bonzas, bigwigs and gray eminencies were already gassed in the death camp of Auschwitz, just plain flotsam and jetsam of the sinking slave ship called Litzmannstadt - Ghetto remained.

" Mama," I said, " Nazis are prolonging our death, not our life. They'll kill us as soon as they'll send the last dirty pillow from the ghetto to the Reich. Remember what uncle Sol used to say, 'We are rocking a dead child in the cradle.'"

My friend, the fourteen year old Stella, described death as a dreamless sleep, a refuge from intolerable conditions, so death acquired a benign and soothing name.
I begged my mother to volunteer for deportation for I was tired of constant hiding and felt lonely without my friends. My mother, a wisp of a woman, less than five feet tall, never listened to me.

" Sally, I want to remain in Lodz, no matter what, and you are talking too much about death and too little about life." She said.

To the six hundred Jews Nazis assigned an old school as a residence putting the women and men in separate sleeping quarters. The Jewish commandant of the camp was a man of highly dubious personal record. It was rumored that he participated in the liquidation of a small ghetto nearby. He was a rather benign person but he had one aim only, to save himself and his own large family. He was friendly, had an easy smile for everyone and never had risen his hand or his voice. The miniscule power temporarily given to him by the Nazis, he never used against the residents of the camp. His assistant, a man of an almost Neanderthal physique was too strong, his cheeks too rosy, his clothes too flashy. He was a porter of sacks of flour in the ghetto where flour meant bread and bread meant life and for bread one could buy a wardrobe bearing labels from the best stores in Berlin, Frankfurt and Prague, the sole remnants of Jews who had been sent from the far away cities to Lodz-Ghetto. Those foreign Jews adjusted poorly to our conditions and soon they sold their elegant clothing for a slice of bread. They didn't last long those Jews for within months they died of starvation or were deported and perished in death camps.

I had feared this strong man as much as I feared the Germans for I saw his face deformed by rage while kicking a worker in the stable. In the presence of the Nazis he shrank, his back had bent and holding the hat in his hand he took orders without looking into the masters eyes. He was all ears and obedience. It was clear that he was a man who would kill and walk on corpses to save his own skin. I didn't want to be the

corpse on his path to survival.

In the camp for the first time in five years hunger disappeared. The deportation was so swift that food assigned for distribution for the ghetto residents was left in storage places. In addition we had now more contacts with Polish workers, and smuggling was a common although a very risky trade.

For the first time in five years I had a full stomach, a pair of leather shoes on my feet, a warm coat and a few months to live. I worked in the stable cleaning horses and soon I smelled like a hard working horse. Every slice of bread, every bowl of soup made my muscles grow and created small depot of fat tissue in my body. The watery sacks under my eyes disappeared, the grayish skin changed to a glistening white, the mousy hair turned into a shiny brown color and my feet started "to swim" in my shoes. With a full stomach the cloudiness of my mind slowly disappeared, my senses became acute as if a curtain was lifted and on a full stomach I was able to admire the golden color of the autumn leaves on the anemic ghetto tree, the leaden color of the ever cloudy sky and the whiteness of the snow in the winter. Hunger had made me color-blind. I had nursed a faint hope that one day my life could be normal again. Without the Nazis. After all the Russians were only seventy-five miles away.

"Sally", my mother said at the beginning of January 1944 " listen closely and you can hear the Russian cannons. The Germans are leaving Lodz in a hurry. The child in the cradle is not dead yet. Nazis would kill us if we don't find a place to hide. But if I'll die, I'll die a happy person to see their defeat. "

Unknown people planned a hiding place in a cellar. It had electricity, stored water, food and even a small radio which proved that the groundwork had been done over a long time. The Russian invasion was very swift and three days before the liberation we went at night to the cellar in small groups and soon more than forty people were sitting there, more that the cellar could accommodate. Julian was the leader of a group of young energetic men who prepared for the hideout and now he gave brisk and

short orders.

"We don't have guns," Julian declared " but a knife, a fork and a piece of heavy iron is a weapon against the Nazis. We have water for three days, so use it sparingly, for drinking only. "We, " he showed five young men " are taking charge of you until the liberation."

The spirits were high but soon the pails were overflowing with excrement, for we all developed a nervous diarrhea. The entrance to the cellar was covered with wood and guarded by the young men. The guards changed every eight hours. I couldn't sleep, I had to talk for I knew then that I would live and I had to discuss my future with these brave boys. I was starved for heroes and I had found my real life heroes in them.

" I don't know what to do with myself after the war", I confessed to Ira," look, I 'm eighteen years old, too old to go to school. At that age one starts the university and I didn't graduate from high school."

"You're never too old to go back to school. I am planning to start medical school after the war. Would you like to be my medical assistant in the future?" Without waiting for my answer Ira listened to the occupants of the cellar.

" Ira" his patients complained " I have a headache, shakes, stomach cramps, diarrhea." And Ira had drugs for all the ills. I discovered later that he gave everybody the same little, white pills he had in his small bag. But the patients felt better and thanked him profusely.

" It helped me right away. You'll make a good doctor. " Ira was too busy to listen to their praise for a real medical crisis emerged in the cellar.

"Sally," said Ira, "Your father needs fresh air. He'll suffocate in the cellar. The stench here is intolerable and it exacerbates his asthma. The danger of dying in the cellar for him is greater than being killed by the Germans outside."

His assessment of the situation made sense and Ira went for his eight hours shift and took my father with him. One of the occupants, Dr. Poznanski was immersed in writing

long notes while sitting on the floor. He was so absorbed in his writing, that he hadn't drank or eaten and he seemed to be insensitive to the odor of feces, urine and sweat of the forty people squeezed in the cellar. He was feverish, unaware of the surroundings, driven by the calling of leaving a testimonial.

Now, I said to myself, I must talk to Julian. Julian was a very popular man in camp. He was friendly, very open and he had a pleasant, deep voice, which charmed all the girls in camp, making his wife's life miserable.

My mother had expressed her displeasure, " The young people in camp have no restraint and sex is on their mind. Don't mingle with them. Julian is the worse. Carious had a voice, Gigli had a voice but Julian has a chronic laryngitis and stupid girls are attracted to him, his voice and his silly songs. He is a married man and far from handsome. He looks like a cross between an orangutan and a chimpanzee." She gave me a fierce look and a warning hang in her voice.

I narrowed my eyes and asked, " We may be killed today, tomorrow or after tomorrow. What should we do? Sit and pray for mercy to the non-existing God?"

"Who told you that we're 'kaput'?" My mother asked searching for an answer in my eyes.

I never had won an argument with my mother for mom's arguments followed their own logic. But she did it again. The next day I noticed that Julian's forehead was very narrow, his nose flat, teeth large and uneven and his brisk, bowlegged gait reminded me of King- Kong. I heard now his raspy, hoarse voice and the songs were, well, foolish.

Here, in the damp cellar everything seemed to come into focus and I remembered the many nights when Julian's wife was asking, " Did you see my husband?" My mother always gave me the knowing look, "Poor thing, worried about this good-for-nothing- husband while he has a good time with a Hela or a Bella." It was no more a puzzle that Julian and his friends had worked always near the cellar

without a Hela or Bella. Wait, wait... the cellar... It was my uncle's place, built twelve meters deep in the ground to keep ice during the summer.

I approached Julian while he was sitting on a high chair, half-awake. He came back from his shift very concerned. Gestapo accompanied by dogs was searching for Jews.

"Julian, what are your plans after the war? " I asked him while he barely could open the eyes.

" Sally, the war is still going on and we don't know if we'll join the living or the dead. Listen to me, no matter what you'll do, enjoy your life for youth is not eternal. He was already snoring.

I ran to Alex who just had came down the ladder. I was dismissed with a pat on the head and an advice.

" Stop asking questions. But if you want my opinion I'll tell you. Marry as soon as possible and have a lot of kids. We may be the last Jews left."

On the third day of our hiding, a strong voice from above, like a voice of God, proclaimed.

" Jews, leave the cellar. Vanyas are in Lodz. We are liberated. LISTEN. WE ARE FREE".

"Don't move, it may be a trick," warned Julian," Stay in the cellar till Ira can confirm the news". But the voice did not stop shouting, begging, crying and finally the lid of the cellar was lifted and a rush of fresh winter air choked us. Dr. Poznanski was almost trampled by the crowd. He was still sitting on the floor writing notes like an ancient scribe. We climbed the ladder to the exit and the bright sun blinded me. My breath clouded the transparent air.

The wire fence surrounding the ghetto was torn down by the Poles who were now plundering the buildings and finishing the destruction started by the Nazis. They were going in and coming out of the empty houses. Some disappointed looters set the

houses on fire. The second eradication of Lodz-Ghetto took place.

The Poles approached us with compassion. "Come to us, you poor fellow Jews and take off the yellow star of your coats. Your Golgota is over." I was invited to their miserable, crowded apartments where the Polish poverty had a characteristic smell of stored cabbage, and they shared with me the meager food they had.

I began to talk more and more freely with every sip of vodka.

"My long lost brothers and sisters. We lived under the same sky for hundreds of years squeezed between two powerful neighbors. We fought and bled together when they invaded our Fatherland, we speak the same language. Our ancestors are buried under the same Polish soil. We are one nation, equals among equals" I formed my own declaration of freedom and human rights.

"The spring of peoples is coming." I announced in alcoholic elation to the equally drunken audience. I embroiled my speech with a patriotic song" Rota."

" We are the Polish nation, the ancient tribe of Piast. So help us God, so help us God."

"Welcome to a new, brave, better world." I cried when the Poles carried me on their shoulders like a holy Arch.

I saw young faces dark from the fires of war of the Russian soldiers marching into Lodz. They showed only one direction: "Na zapad- to the West, to Berlin."

A week later the young men from the cellar were arrested, **one by one**, by the Soviets and sent to a Russian lager.

During the oncoming year Jews were killed in their apartments, in big cities and in small towns. They were removed from trains, buses and shot by the Poles.

A year later during the pogrom in Kielce forty-one Jews, all survivors of concentration camps, were killed by a Polish mob.

The spring of peoples turned into a brutal winter.